

BOOK REVIEWS

OFFSHORE SEA LIFE ID GUIDE: WEST COAST, and OFFSHORE SEA LIFE ID GUIDE: EAST COAST – Steve N G Howell and Brian L Sullivan. Both published in soft covers by Princeton University Press [press.princeton.edu] at US\$14.95 / £10.95. West Coast containing 56 132mm x 196mm pages, more than 300 colour photos and one map; East Coast containing 64 132mm x 196mm pages and 120 colour photos. Soft cover ISBNs 978-0-6911-6613-1 and 978-0-6911-6621-6; e-Book ISBNs 978-1-4008-6597-0 and 978-1-4008-7403-3

Steve Howell, an international bird tour leader with WINGS and a research associate at the California Academy of Sciences, has teamed up with one of the most respected bird photographers in America, Brian Sullivan, who is eBird project leader and photographic editor for *Birds of North America Online* at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. Together they have created two offshore wildlife guides, one for each coast of the United States. They are the first state-of-the-art pocket guides to pelagic sea life and are designed to be used during day trips in offshore waters. As such, they concentrate on the species seen on whale watching and birding trips off the US coasts.

The informative text highlights what to look for and is suitable for beginners and experts alike. The carefully crafted colour plates show species as they typically appear at sea. The material is organised in such a way as to help identify species by age and sex likely to be seen together, as they might be while feeding. The books do not include coastal birds such as most gulls, terns, and cormorants, or inland waterways species such as harbour seals and otters. They cover a few of the rarer species, but not in great depth.

The West Coast guide covers Washington to California waters and features more than 300 photos used to create composite plates, including whales, dolphins, sea lions, birds, sharks, turtles, flying fish, jellyfish, molas (sunfish) and more. A sample chapter can be downloaded from <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/i10465.pdf>. The East Coast guide covers Maine to Florida and features more than 100 colour photos and composite plates, including whales, dolphins, birds, sharks, billfish, turtles, flying fish, seaweeds, sea skaters, jellyfish and more. A sample chapter can be downloaded from <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/i10465.pdf>.

Perhaps the only drawback is that the design of the books makes it difficult to discern one composite plate from another on some pages. I found it confusing when trying to read across a spread and link the text on the left with the photo on the right, when that image blended together with three others next to it, all of them composed from multiple images. Perhaps a future edition will separate the images enough to make them clearly distinct from one another.

On the other hand, I really appreciated the composite photos that show different features of sexes next to each other, and the differences between adult and juvenile within species. I also liked seeing the different indicators of what a whale may be doing when you see a certain display, and birds in flight as well as on the water. These authors clearly have a treasure-trove of amazing photos, and we are privileged to share them. The two books do not aim to be comprehensive guides, however, but rather identification aids, handy to keep on deck to look up what you see quickly and ideal for those times on an ocean passage when a rare, brief glimpse gives momentary access to the natural world.

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